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Mary Jane W. Scott

Alexander Smith: Poet of Victorian Scotland



"It ought...to be distinctly recognised that, whatever he is by birth, Mr. Smith is *not* a Scottish poet, if we understand by that a poet of a certain supposed national type. It is not Scottish scenery, Scottish history, Scottish character, and Scottish social humours that he represents or depicts," wrote David Masson in 1853.¹ Scots critic Masson must have held a very narrow definition of that "supposed national type," the Scottish poet, who presumably ought to limit himself to explicitly Scottish themes (and, probably, to Scots language as well). His critical motives in thus commenting on Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama* (*Poems*, 1853) were perhaps nationalistic, more probably unimaginative. His conception of what the Scottish poet and Scottish poetry should be, was then (and still is) a common one, but clearly inadequate in failing to acknowledge the contributions of Anglo-Scots such as Smith. In his initial judgment of Alexander Smith, Masson was certainly premature.

A Life-Drama is in English, and was in fact heavily influenced by English and German Romantic literature and by Elizabethan drama. The poem's unevenness prompted Prof. W. E. Aytoun of Edinburgh to include Smith, along with English poets P. J. Bailey, Sydney Dobell, J. S. Bigg and J. W. Marston, in the infamous "Spasmodic School." But even the early *Life-Drama* incorporates much that is particularly Scottish in its most out-

standing features, its strongly autobiographical theme and its abundant descriptive imagery. Alexander Smith's imagination fed primarily on his own mid-Victorian Scottish experience; his best poetry was always highly subjective, and his poetic representations could not help but reflect Scottish landscape, character and society. The Scottish description in the obsessively egocentric *Life-Drama* acts rather as pathetic fallacy (echoing the speaker's inner "spasms") than as realistic description for its own sake. But even here, Smith has transformed the borrowed attitudes and vocabulary of English Romantic poetry, to express his Scottish experience. Masson's early judgment would become particularly inappropriate after *A Life-Drama*, as Smith drew increasingly away from his English models and from the strident egocentricity of the "Spasmodic" style, to find his own poetic voice. He would develop the ability, hinted at in *Poems*, to place the Self within the Scottish context, and thus to strike a balance between subjective and objective, internal and environmental elements in his poetry. The Scottish landscape would achieve autonomy, separate identity from the poet's mind, in *City Poems* and in subsequent mature works. Thus can Alexander Smith's poetry, in addition to his abundant and strongly Scottish prose, tell us a great deal about Scotland in the mid-19th Century.

Alexander Smith was born in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire in 1829,² the son of a Lowland textile-pattern designer and his Highland wife. The Ayrshire birthplace was the first of many connections Smith would make between himself and Robert Burns; that he identified with Burns seems clear, from his essay on the poet, which he later used as the Preface for his edition of Burns.³ Other implied parallels included: their background as laborer-poets; their self-education and wide reading; their "inspired" poetic vocation; their usual self-limitation to Scottish subject-matter and settings, as their most effective poetic material; their meteoric rise to fame and their distrust of public favor; their satirical wit (more often apparent in Smith's essays, but nonetheless present in the poetry); their deep love of nature, though always subordinate to the central human focus of the poetry; and the tragedy of their premature deaths (in 1865, when Smith adapted his Burns essay for the Preface, he was ill, and probably aware that he was dying). Smith wrote that Burns' grave was "dug too early--and yet too late," and this was sadly applicable to himself as well, since both poets suffered a loss of fame and favor prior to their early deaths.

After a series of removals to Paisley, and back to Kilmarnock, Smith's family settled in Glasgow, where the boy briefly attended primary school, his only formal education. Here he learnt to do elementary arithmetic and to read well. At the

age of about twelve, "Daft Sandie" took up his father's trade as a pattern-designer, but continued to read voraciously, in English, Scottish and American literature. His early Scottish favorites included Burns, James Thomson, Thomas Campbell and Walter Scott. He probably also read, fairly early on, Hogg, Galt and Carlyle (all three of whom may have directly influenced *A Life-Drama*). He also seems to have been acquainted in youth with the Gaelic oral tradition of song and story, through his Mother and perhaps through a Highland friend or servant who reportedly entertained the family with Ossianic legends. His abiding interest in the Highlands would be reflected in his poetry and prose throughout his career.

It was during this period when, bored with tedious factory work in Glasgow, Smith began to write poetry and essays. He belonged to the Addisonian Literary Society, a group of fellow-laborers who met to practice the art of the English essay. His poetic "calling" he took especially seriously, telling only his closest friends of his endeavors. His first poems were published under the pseudonym "Smith Murray," in the *Glasgow Evening Citizen* (1850-51). Smith's early experience as a laborer in the harsh environment of industrial Glasgow was the main force which would shape his poetic imagination (much as it did Edwin Muir's in this century), for life.

Smith's young life was not without its pleasures, however. During his vacation from the factory each summer, he and his best friend Thomas Brisbane travelled to the Highlands and Islands. A great number of scenes and incidents in the poetry are specifically traceable to these visits, as Brisbane recorded; he also remarked on the extent to which Smith viewed the Highlands through a Romantic literary sensibility tutored by Walter Scott. Thus, while the urban poet Smith's appreciation of the Highlands (the land where "mythologies are bred," "A Boy's Poem," *l.* 664) was often romantic or idealizing, it was always grounded in personal experience. This was not the case with his portrayal of English scenes; Smith made only one trip to England (in 1853), and it remained for him remote. The few English settings in his poetry are sketchy and stylized, and usually distant in time as well as in place.

The young Smith spent much of his spare time in extensive walks along the Clyde and through the countryside near Glasgow, with such friends as Hugh Macdonald, who was an avid Scottish nationalist, naturalist, and aspiring Scots poet. Macdonald not only taught him much about the flora and fauna of the Clyde Valley, details of which appear frequently in the poet's imagery; he also counselled him to abandon English poetry, and write instead in Scots. Smith stood firm, however, and continued to write in English. Although he acknowledged the emo-

tive power of Scots for those who grew up hearing it, "recalling infancy and the thousand instances of a love of a mother's heart,..."⁴ he at this stage held an essentially Romantic attitude to his poetic art: he, the poet, was an inspired partaker in "divine" creation. Smith evidently felt that Scots, which had largely ceased to function on a formal literary level by mid-19th Century, and was used chiefly to evoke mirth or exaggerated sentimentality, was inappropriate to his higher calling, and so employed English from the beginning.

Smith was now leading an increasingly dual life, working in the factory all day and writing poetry late into the night. He produced many lyrics of varying quality, many of which dealt with a poet-persona like himself, who stood apart from the everyday life of the city, sometimes longing for involvement, but isolated, to a degree, by his calling. Smith eventually summoned the courage to send several of the lyrics to the Rev. George Gilfillan of Dundee, critic, reviewer and patron of struggling would-be Romantics. Gilfillan was highly impressed,⁵ and urged Glaswegians to "neglect not one of the finest poets--perhaps, indeed, one promising to be the finest since Campbell--their good city had produced."⁶ At Gilfillan's encouragement, Smith compiled his shorter, largely-autobiographical verses into a long poem in the fashionable monodrama format, *A Life-Drama*. This work formed the bulk of his first volume, *Poems* (1853). *A Life-Drama* is characterized by fitful action and a glut of sensuous, over-rich imagery; its poet-hero, the objectionably egocentric Walter, Smith modelled to an extent on Byron's *Manfred*, Bailey's *Festus*, and Goethe's *Faust* and *Werther* (possibly by way of Carlyle's translations). Primarily, however, Walter represents strong but distorted autobiography. W. E. Aytoun's "Spasmodic" label (a term of opprobrium first applied by Carlyle to Byron⁷), and his cruel parody *Firmilian*, severely damaged Smith's reputation at this crucial period; the "Spasmodic" label would cling to the poet of *A Life-Drama* despite his movement towards a better-balanced, more realistic and readable poetry.

In *A Life-Drama*, the hero Walter moves erratically through "crises" rather than "development" (the typical Spasmodic method⁸), but he ultimately affirms love and acceptance of Victorian "social responsibility."⁹ Carlylean influence would seem to be strong: this climactic "Everlasting Yea," reinforced by Scottish Calvinistic work-ethic principles, as well as the use of abundant garment and textile imagery (central to *Sartor Resartus*, and strengthened by the poet's trade as pattern-designer), and an underlying concept of hero-worship, are characteristic of Smith's earlier, autobiographical poems.

Smith's descriptive method in *A Life-Drama* was simply to ac-

cumulate images in very great abundance ("our chief joy was to draw images from everything," *L-D*, Sc. IX). Of course, the use of copious natural imagery, mosaic-fashion, to compose a vivid picture had long been a feature of Scottish Gaelic descriptive poetry (of which Smith possibly knew, through his Mother, and through translations). In *A Life-Drama*, he used rich conventional Elizabethan and Romantic imagery in new combinations, and often with new concreteness and realistic impact, and also introduced fresh images to deal with complex psychological insights and responses to the environment of 19th-Century Scotland. While he described the countryside with great affection, his most striking and original imagery was that of the Industrial Revolution, essentially urban (Glasgow) inspired. Smith's "Iron World" (*L-D*, Sc. IV) is James Thomson's "iron times" (*Seasons*, "Spring," l. 274) of progressive society, fulfilled in Victorian Scotland.

While Smith's urban imagery is most plentiful and effective in the mature *City Poems* volume, it is nevertheless powerfully present in *A Life-Drama*, chiefly as it serves to reflect Walter's states of mind. Much of the Glasgow/Clyde description foreshadows the imagery of the lyric "Glasgow." An example of Smith's adaptation of conventional Romantic imagery, to express his vision of industrial Glasgow, might be this Shelleyan fire-personification, transformed:

As slow he journeyed home, the wanderer saw
 The labouring fires come out against the dark,
 For with the light the country seemed on flame:
 Innumerable furnaces and pits,
 And gloomy holds, in which that bright slave, Fire,
 Doth pant and toil all day and night for man,
 Threw large and angry lustres on the sky,
 And shifting lights across the long black roads.
 (*L-D*, Sc. VIII).

Such passages also recall Galt's *The Entail*, which portrays a similar vision of early 19th-Century, industrial Glasgow.¹⁰ From the beginning, Smith was careful to incorporate the machinery of the Industrial Revolution into his urban vision; the foundry and factory, the railroad, the steamboat and the telegraph are as much a part of the Scottish landscape as the ancient Clyde itself, which runs through the city dark, deathly and Styx-like:

This stream has turned
 The wheels of commerce, and come forth distained;
 And now trails slowly through a city's heart,

Drawing its filth as doth an evil soul
Attract all evil things; putrid and black...
(L-D, Sc. X)

Smith's preoccupation with sin and evil, especially morbid in *A Life-Drama*, probably derived much from his Scottish Calvinistic upbringing, as well as from his reading of authors of moral-psychological emphasis such as Hogg, and his American counterpart Hawthorne; Walter of the "scarr'd heart, fed upon by hungry fires" (L-D, Sc. V) is in many ways a character worthy of either novelist.

A Life-Drama draws the significant contrast, developed with greater complexity in *City Poems* and later lyrics, between city and country. The poet-persona comes to accept his urban reality, to join in it, only in the poem's conclusion; acceptance of the city in any of the *Poems* is tentative, at best. In *A Life-Drama* the city, Glasgow, is vividly portrayed in terms of evil, darkness, and death; its atmosphere of murk, fog and smoke creates a particularly "northern" hell (compare hell's northern climate in Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*). By Smith's day, of course, industry had added greatly to the already grim atmosphere of the northern city. In contrast, the surrounding countryside is depicted, rather less realistically, in an atmosphere of brightness, clarity and color.

The passages in *A Life-Drama* which refer to the Highlands assume a Wordsworthian poetic voice, adapted to the Scottish scene; their simple, moving diction, quieter tone and more spiritual themes (love of nature, time and memory, the divinity of childhood) contrast sharply with Walter's usual urban intensity. These passages, recounting Walter's visit to Loch Lubnaig, contain a great deal of detailed description of places and incidents (for example, the graveyard scene and the eclipse, Sc. VI) which Brisbane would confirm as genuine, based on his visits with the poet to the Highlands.

A Highland reference of a different character occurs in Sc. VIII of *A Life-Drama*; it is the "Drinking Song" in praise of whiskey. The singer (Arthur) is English, and his song presents the typical mid-Victorian English picture of Scotland (complete with purple heather, deer-hunting parties, bagpipe music, "fresh ruddy lasses," and whiskey-quaffing stereotypes). The Scottish Highlands were opening up to English tourists during Victoria's reign as never before, and were frequently made the subject of English literature (such as, for example, Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie*, 1848¹¹). Smith's rollicking lyric seems, in fact, to have been a subtle parody, both of currently popular English notions of the Scottish Highlands, and of native Scottish sentimental or "kailyard" literature, which was

an equally stereotyped product of the 19th Century. In his parody, Smith also hinted at the darker, more violent side of Scottish life ("hills stained with heather, like bloody foot-prints;" and, in general, the dangerous grip whiskey can take on men's souls). Like Burns, he was able to strike a satirical note without sacrificing the lyrical delight or good humor of the song. Smith's skill at parody is a dimension of his talent which, unfortunately, has been overlooked or misinterpreted by his critics.

The language of *A Life-Drama* is, as might be expected, highly derivative of the English Romantics and their Elizabethan forebears in the "decorative" tradition. The poem does contain certain northern archaisms (such as "for aye") and even a few Scotticisms (such as Scots "aboon," and such localizing nouns as "braes" and the Gaelic "cairn"). Still, though a greater number of Scotticisms occur in *A Life-Drama* than in the later poems, they are nowhere particularly abundant in Smith's poetry (he used them more frequently to give "race"¹² to his prose works, to enhance local color, control tone, and exploit the unique connotative power of the dialect). His only Scots poem is also his only thoroughgoing satire; the late verse "The Jubilation of Sergeant Major M'Turk in Witnessing The Highland Games"¹³ again attacks overly-sentimental views of Scotland, mocking the futility of modern Highland Games. It parodies such tartan-thumping nationalism as found in verses like John Imlah's "The Gathering."¹⁴ In the final stanza, contrasting mock with real war, Smith employed the arresting Burnsian technique of turning from comic Scots verse to pure English, to make his serious point: "When bayonets next are levell'd/They may all be needed then."

Before considering *City Poems*, it is worth noting a further verse from the *Poems* volume, of an experimental nature. In "Lady Barbara," departing from his usual autobiographical stance, Smith attempted to enter into the mind of an independent character. The verse is ballad-like, although it is not a ballad proper (Smith did not believe in the possibility of writing good modern ballad-imitations,¹⁵ but chose rather to try to capture the psychological/emotional essence, the immediacy of ballad literature in his own new way). "Lady Barbara" has its experimental counterpart in this Browningsque, distancing mode in *City Poems*, "Squire Maurice" (whose plot, the difficult love of a nobleman for a peasant girl, recalls Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd*, as well as the interpolated tale of Palemon and Lavinia in Thomson's *Seasons*, though without their simple, happy dénouements). It is interesting to note that both "Lady Barbara" and "Squire Maurice" are set in remote time, in a stylized and very English landscape, unlike Smith's more realistic Scottish

settings for his autobiographical poems. These poems attempt to present, objectively, complex human situations, but neither is wholly successful, since they treat of themes outside the poet's own Scottish experience.

"The Change," an appropriately-titled autobiographical poem in his second volume, *City Poems* (1857), marks a number of important changes in Smith's life and art. He had given up his factory work in 1854, to take up an appointment as Secretary to Edinburgh University. He had married (his wife was a Highland girl, one Flora Macdonald from Skye, a descendant of the heroine), and had settled in the pleasant suburb of Wardie, near Edinburgh. "The Change" celebrates Smith's discovery of his own poetic voice. It signals the poet's longed-for return to the "real world," both in his life and in his poetry (a goal hinted at in "Sonnet No. Three," *Poems*), and simultaneously refutes the lofty Romantic-Spasmodic concept of the poet's rôle which he had once assumed:¹⁶

But mine is now a humbled heart,
My lonely pride is weak as tears;
No more I seek to stand apart,
A mocker of the rolling years.
Imprisoned in this wintry clime,
I've found enough, O Lord of breath,
Enough to plume the feet of time,
Enough to hide the eyes of death.
(*"The Change,"* ll. 57-64)

In the "wintry clime" of Scotland, Smith had found new potential for a more outward-looking, true-to-nature poetry. His *City Poems* are far superior to *Poems*, and this is largely because they are on a human scale, grounded more realistically than ever in the poet's experience of life in mid-Victorian Scotland.

"Horton" opens *City Poems*; it is another monodrama, more carefully constructed than *A Life-Drama* and acting as a sequel to it. The character Horton was a poet-friend of the main speaker, representing Smith as he had been, a larger-than-life Romantic who strove too high and failed. Horton had died--just as Smith's youthful poetic Self had died. The main speaker is Smith himself, as he became, having cast off the impossible, Walter-like pretensions of youth. In addition to this central autobiographical situation, the poem is full of real details and incidents (for example, Horton's song, the refrain for the dead Barbara, which refers to Smith's lady-friend Barbara who drowned in the Glasgow and Paisley Canal in 1850). The poet's balancing of complex relationships in time and space, his skillful use of the internal monologue, and his bold and original

urban imagery in the autobiographical "Horton" are typical of his mature, *City Poems* style.

"A Boy's Poem" is also strongly autobiographical, and built on Smith's personal recollections and impressions of Glasgow and the Highlands. It tells much of the young poet's own story, of his development in the context of 19th-Century Scotland, in contrast to the crisis-ridden, often obscure subjectivity of *A Life-Drama*. There is an abundance of rich and closely-detailed imagery (far less derivative than in the early *Poems*), describing the specifically-Scottish landscape, both urban and rural. The many images of the Industrial Revolution exist in the landscape without a trace of awkwardness. The Highland descriptions, due to the poet's visits there with his wife, show renewed immediacy and affection. In many instances, "A Boy's Poem" parallels Smith's only novel, *Alfred Hagart's Household* (1866), which likewise portrays a Scottish childhood largely based on Smith's own. *Alfred Hagart's Household* might seem a rather pale imitation of Galt's novels of domestic life in the West of Scotland, but it makes pleasant reading, and is of some autobiographical interest. Smith had projected a full-scale Scottish novel, but never carried it out; he did, however, publish in periodicals several short-stories on Scottish themes.

Smith's poetic masterpiece is the lyric "Glasgow." It was not entirely original in concept, having followed the Glasgow pedlar-poet James Macfarlan's *City Songs* volume of Glasgow poetry (1855); Macfarlan had in turn, however, based much of his urban imagery on Smith's *A Life-Drama* and his other early poems. In "Glasgow," Smith at last made the difficult assertion of *acceptance* of the city in all its aspects (an acceptance Edwin Muir was never able to make). Now, he could cry: "In thee, O City! I discern/Another beauty, sad and stern" (ll.47-8). The ability to sustain such a central paradox, in a sort of "Negative Capability," is characteristic of his mature poetry; "Glasgow" is a superb illustration of the balance in his poetic vision, of subjective and objective views, good and evil elements which he achieved in *City Poems*. In "Glasgow" the speaker, clearly Smith himself, proclaims his love-hate relationship with the city, always aware that he belongs to it:

"City! I am true son of thine" (l. 9);

"I know the tragic hearts of towns" (l. 8);

"I know thee as my mother's face" (l. 56);

"Of me thou hast become a part--
Some kindred with my human heart" (ll. 116-7);

"For we have been familiar more
Than galley-slave and weary oar" (ll. 119-120).

In "Glasgow," rural life is known to the speaker only through small, second-hand messages like "A dropt rose lying in my way,/ A butterfly that flutters gay/Athwart the noisy street" (ll. 92-4). Deepest meanings for him are not found in the less-familiar country landscape, but in the city: "All raptures of this mortal breath,/Solemnities of life and death,/Dwell in thy noise alone" (ll. 113-5), and, "A sacredness of love and death/Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath" (ll. 135-6). The "sad and stern" images of the urban scene are closely detailed and realistic, in deliberate contrast to the more conventional, idealized rural descriptions. Likewise, the several urban personifications (the city itself, the railroad, the Clyde) are dynamically portrayed, with concrete, sensuous images, while the rural personifications (Summer, Autumn, the rainbow) are stylized, emblematic. Glasgow is described, as in *A Life-Drama*, in terms of hellish darkness, murk and death, and the concise lyric form makes for even greater immediacy. Such closely-observed description of the particularly harsh aspects of the environment was a Scottish literary commonplace by Smith's day (usually applying to more realistic "winter," as opposed to stylized "spring," representations); Smith's application of "winter" realism to industrial Glasgow added a new dimension to the tradition. In *City Poems*, and especially in "Glasgow," Smith broke away from his early English Romantic models and proved himself a master of that supremely Scottish talent, the poetry of realistic natural description.

Smith's last poem of length is the historical-narrative *Edwin of Deira* (1861). The story's germ had been told as the interpolated tale in the poem "An Evening at Home" (*Poems*, 1853), indicating Smith's early interest in the myth of Edwin (King of Northumbria in the 7th Century, who welcomed Christianity into Northern Britain and who was said to have founded Edinburgh, or "Edwin's Burgh"). This Northern legend must have appealed to Smith in its connection with Edinburgh, for he was by then living there, and was forming a deep affection for the city. *Edwin* was a failure in 1861, however, and remains so; while highly polished and controlled, it lacks the fundamental ingredient of Smith's best work: personal experience. It is remote from 19th-Century Scotland (as are "Lady Barbara" and "Squire Maurice") and from Smith's own life. Unlike *A Life-Drama*, which is too subjective, *Edwin* is perhaps too objective,

and likewise unbalanced.

Two short lyrics were published in the *Edwin* volume, which are more successful; they are both specifically Highland in theme, and inspired by Smith's journeys to Skye with his wife. "Torquil and Oona" is a ballad-like tale of death by drowning (a prominent theme in Scottish literature, from the ballads, to Romantics Falconer and Campbell, to the 20th-Century Orkney poet George Mackay Brown). "Blaavin" is an intimate description of the speaker's love for a Highland mountain, and his self-perceptions in relation to it. Such affectionate personification of a mountain or other natural object is a Gaelic literary convention¹⁷ (adopted recently, for example, by Norman MacCaig in his "A Man in Assynt").¹⁸ Smith's appreciation of Gaelic poetry, at least in translations, was confirmed in his critical comments on "Ossian," and translations of "Ossianic" poetry by one Rev. Mr. Macpherson of Inverary, which he published in *A Summer in Skye*, 1865. Both "Torquil and Oona" and "Blaavin" are typical of Smith's later lyric poetry, in their quieter, more philosophical approach, their more controlled yet effective and carefully-chosen descriptive imagery, and their ultimate spirit of optimism, or faith in nature.

The short, semi-autobiographical lyric remained Smith's most congenial form, and although he published no more volumes of poetry after *Edwin*, he continued to write some worthwhile poetry, published in *A Summer in Skye*, and posthumously in *Last Leaves*. His poetic output declined considerably, as he wrote more and more popular prose to support a growing family. His later poetry in general shows the influence of a quieter, more comfortable life in Edinburgh than he had known in Glasgow--Edinburgh, too, provided poetic inspiration, but of a gentler sort. His imagery became subdued, restrained; his attitude grew more contemplative and spiritual. Harsh urban and industrial imagery faded, and a more idealizing natural imagery predominated. A typical such poem is "Autumn" (*Summer in Skye*), set near Edinburgh. The pleasing melancholy of the descriptive imagery shows the possible influence of Thomson's "Autumn," filtered through his disciple in nature-poetry, Tennyson. The poem's philosophy seems related to the Scottish Calvinistic work-ethic, implied in Smith's earlier poems, and coming from the heart of a Scottish Victorian laborer-poet; here, the stern lesson of the necessity and value of productive labor is taught by fruitful nature, in an incantatory lyric.

By this time, the mid-1860's, Smith was feeling the pressures of an increasingly onerous job; the Reform Act of 1858 had added greatly to his duties as Secretary to the University. He began to dream of owning a sheep-farm in Skye, but grew ill before he could realize this dream. As his own death approached,

his poetry dwelt on his favorite themes of time and death with particular poignancy. With these late, meditative pieces he had come full circle, from the intensely subjective early poetry, through poetry of personal and social "realism," to poetry of universal philosophical significance. He had gained faith: not the orthodox Presbyterian faith recommended to him by his mentor Gilfillan many years before,¹⁹ but a very personal faith in nature's renewing power. Smith died in 1867, at age 37.

Smith left a poetic fragment when he died, entitled "Edinburgh" (*Last Leaves*); it was intended as a companion-piece to "Glasgow," but he was unable to complete it. While "Glasgow" had been central to Smith's mid-Victorian, socially-aware and immediate outlook, in "Edinburgh" he went beyond the particulars of the cityscape to create an imaginative, transcendent vision. The two poems share the characteristic subjective stance, but the subject himself had changed; Smith described his adopted city, Edinburgh, as he might have described his later poetry: "My later home is still and fair/With mournfulness of sunset air" (ll. 7-8). With subtlety the poet sifted Edinburgh's many appearances and moods, including the added dimension of historical association, to try to discover the city's essence, its total reality. The delicately varied atmospheric imagery of light and color in "Edinburgh" is less concrete, more abstract and idealizing than that of grim "Glasgow": Smith did not mention Edinburgh's horrors of the Cowgate and Canongate slums in the poem (though he knew of them and described them in *A Summer in Skye*), and the poem's only violence is on the historical plane. Broadly, where Glasgow had been depicted in terms of "hell," Edinburgh was a "heaven," but each embraced infinite variations; Smith knew, accepted and belonged to both Scottish cities. Glasgow and Edinburgh were simply the most appropriate symbols the poet knew, to represent the dual nature of life, and of his own life in particular.

Although the great bulk of his prose has tended to overshadow the poetry, Alexander Smith would have wanted to be known primarily as a poet, and it remains true that as a poet he made his most original contributions to Scottish (and British) literature. He wrote, first and foremost, to express himself and his personal vision of mid-Victorian Scotland. Any specific literary influences, English or Scottish, are of secondary importance to the central, subjective and Scottish stance of the poet. Even David Masson was later to admit that Smith's poetry was grounded in his Scottish experience, though he held that Smith transformed this experience into "a visionary world that was in no particular sense Scottish." Masson was right in his final judgment of Smith, however, when he praised the poet's ability to transcend the bounds of Scottish language and subject-matter,²⁰

to create a poetry of universal import. Perhaps because he lived in Smith's own time, Masson did not realize just how much Smith's poetry would tell us, in the 20th Century, about the real life and the landscape of 19th-Century Scotland. The paradoxical beauty and the truth of Victorian Scotland itself, as the poet knew and accepted it, inspired the best of Alexander Smith's Anglo-Scottish poetry.

Columbia, South Carolina

NOTES

¹ [David Masson], "Theories of Poetry and a New Poet," *North British Review*, Vol. 19, No. 38 (August, 1853), p. 339.

² The date of Smith's birth has long been disputed (he was born Dec. 31st of either 1829 or 1830); most biographers have given 1829, though this has never been proven conclusively. The chief biographies of Smith, from which the biographical data in the present article is drawn, are: Thomas Brisbane, *The Early Years of Alexander Smith* (London, 1869), and Patrick Proctor Alexander, "Memoir" of Smith in his edition of Smith's *Last Leaves* (Edinburgh, 1868), pp. v-cxxiii.

³ Alexander Smith, ed., *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (London, 1865).

⁴ Alexander Smith, "Scottish Ballads," *Last Leaves*, pp. 26-7n.

⁵ [George Gilfillan], "Recent Poetry," *Eclectic Review*, N.S. Vol. 2 (October, 1851), pp. 447-62; "A New Poet in Glasgow," *Critic*, Vol. 10 (December 1, 1851), pp. 567-8.

⁶ Gilfillan, quoted by Brisbane, *Early Years*, pp. 123-4.

⁷ P. P. Alexander, "Memoir," *Last Leaves*, p. lxx.

⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (London, 1966), p. 47.

⁹ Mark A. Weinstein, *William Edmondstone Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* (New Haven, 1968), p. 90.

¹⁰ John Galt's *The Entail* was first published in 1822. Note the similarity of Smith's portrayal of Walter, and of Glasgow in "pathetic fallacy" with him, to the character Claud, whose thoughts and feelings are likewise reflected by the industrial city, for example: "His [Claud's] whole bosom was a flaming furnace--raging as fiercely as those of the Muirkirk Iron Works that served to illuminate his path," John Galt, *The Entail*, ed. Ian A. Gordon (London, 1970), p. 245.

¹¹ For a discussion of this, see Editor's Notes to Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie*, ed. Patrick Scott (Brisbane, 1976).

¹² Dr. Samuel Johnson used the vintner's term "race" to describe the unique flavor and descriptive force of James Thomson's language in *The Seasons*, in its earlier versions, before the revisions rid the poem of much of its Scottish expression (Johnson, "Thomson," *Lives of the Poets*).

¹³ Alexander Smith, *A Summer in Skye* (London, 1865), I, 316-7.

¹⁴ John Imlah, "The Gathering," *Whistle Binkie* (Glasgow, 1878), I, 43. It originally appeared in Series 4 (1853) of that collection.

¹⁵ Smith, "Scottish Ballads," pp. 59-60.

¹⁶ Smith's essay "Sydney Dobell" (*Last Leaves*, pp. 171-209) is the parallel in prose, of his rejection of the Romantic-Spasmodic poet's rôle in "The Change."

¹⁷ A good example is "Praise of Ben Dorain" by the 18th-Century Gaelic poet, Duncan McIntyre, discussed by Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 188-9.

¹⁸ Norman MacCaig, "A Man in Assynt," *Akros*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (March, 1968), pp. 11-17.

¹⁹ George Gilfillan, *A Third Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh, 1854), pp. 159-60.

²⁰ [David Masson], "Alexander Smith," *Macmillan's*, Vol. XV (February 15, 1867), pp. 343ff.